

September 19, 2008: USCIRF: State Department Should Make Prompt "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) Designations

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom applauds today's release of the International Religious Freedom Report 2008, a survey by the U.S. State Department of conditions around the world that have an impact on this vital human right.

The Commission is nonetheless concerned that the State Department has not designated any country as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, since November 2006. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which established both the Commission and the State Department's Office of International Religious

Freedom, specifically directs the Secretary of State to review religious freedom conditions around the world on an annual basis and, based on that review, to designate as CPCs those countries in which the government has engaged in or tolerated "particularly severe violations of religious freedom."

The State Department's annual religious freedom report for 2006-07 was issued in September 2007, but no CPC designations were made based on that report. Now a subsequent report has been issued. While the report is extremely valuable in its breadth and depth, its purpose is to help the Administration identify the worst religious freedom violators and seek improvements from them, as required by IRFA. The CPC designation process is vital to the legislation, and not making or unduly delaying those designations undermines IRFA's statutory scheme. The Commission calls on Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to issue her designation of CPCs promptly.

The Commission wrote to Secretary of State Rice in May, continuing to recommend that she, using authority delegated to her by the President, designate as CPCs the following 11 countries: Burma, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

The Commission continues to differ with the State Department over the assessment of religious freedom conditions in several of those countries:

- The State Department removed Vietnam from the CPC list in 2006, a move that the Commission is convinced was unwarranted and premature. It has not identified it as a CPC since. After traveling to Vietnam last winter, the Commission concluded that while notable progress has been made in some areas, improvements did not extend to all religious communities, provinces, or ethnic minorities. In addition, laws issued at the national level were not fully implemented or were ignored at the local level and there continue to be too many abuses of and restrictions on religious freedom experienced by diverse religious communities, including against those who peacefully advocate religious freedom. Vietnam continues to be praised by U.S. officials for its progress, but the U.S. government and the international community still need to press Vietnam's leaders to make immediate improvements to end religious freedom abuses, ease restrictions, and release prisoners. Re-designating Vietnam as a CPC would send a clear signal that religious freedom and human rights are high priorities in our bilateral relationship.

- The State Department has never designated Pakistan as a CPC. However, it is the Commission's view that the government's response to sectarian and religiously motivated violence, particularly against Shi'as, Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus, remains inadequate. Populations of internally displaced persons fleeing Shi'a-Sunni violence receive little assistance, and religious extremism in increasingly numbers of Taliban-controlled communities remains a serious threat to religious freedom. A number of the country's laws, including legislation restricting the Ahmadi community and laws against blasphemy, have been used to silence members of religious minorities and dissenters, and they frequently result in imprisonment on account of religion or belief and/or vigilante violence against the accused. The Hudood Ordinances-Islamic decrees predominantly affecting women that are enforced alongside Pakistan's secular legal system-provide for harsh punishments, including amputation and death by stoning, for alleged violations of Islamic law. There is also mounting evidence from multiple sources that Pakistan's government has been complicit in providing sanctuary to the Taliban.

- Turkmenistan, too, has never been included on the State Department's CPC list, even though significant religious freedom and human rights problems and official harassment of religious adherents persist. Police raids and other forms of harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue more than a year after the death of longtime dictator Saparmurat Niyazov. The repressive 2003 religion law remains in force, causing severe difficulties for the legal functioning of religious groups. Turkmenistan's new president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, has adopted policies to decrease the role of the former president's personality cult in the form of the Ruhnama in religious affairs and as a mandatory feature of public education. Yet, due to the country's information vacuum, it is very difficult to assess the actual impact of these policies. Although the new president has taken some isolated steps, including the release of the country's former chief mufti, systemic legal reforms, directly related to religious freedom and other human rights, although promised, have not yet been made.

- While the State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC since 2004, the Commission continues to differ with the Department over the extent of reforms in the Kingdom. The Saudi government continues to commit serious violations of freedom of religion and related human rights of the members of Muslim communities from a variety of schools of Islam, as well as non-Muslims, by banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and by interfering with private religious practice. The government also continues to be a source of funding used globally to finance religious schools, hate literature, and other activities that support religious intolerance and, in some cases, violence toward

non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims-actions that are incompatible with the Saudi government's commitments as a member of the United Nations. In addition, the government's policy of curtailing universal rights for non-Saudi visitors to the country and inhibiting the enjoyment of human rights on an equal basis for expatriate workers, particularly the two - three million non-Muslim workers, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and others, who have gone to Saudi Arabia for temporary employment, results in severe religious freedom violations.

The Commission's assessments are presented in greater detail in our 2008 Annual Report, <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/AR2008/annual%20report%202008-final%20edition.pdf>

The Commission commends the State Department's Office for International Religious Freedom for producing the annual report, which exemplifies the dedication and expertise of the Office staff. Together with their colleagues in the field, they ensure that the State Department is well informed of religious freedom developments. The Commission nonetheless is convinced that the State Department needs to go further by naming CPCs in a timely manner.